

About Livelihood and Living of the Youth in Latin America

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I am part of the despairing middle class in Mexico, a generation of young people who went to private schools, who went to college, who speak English, live on their own and have a job. I am part of a minority, and even that seems exaggerating, only around of 17% of the total population actually gets in to a college in Mexico. And I say despairing because the crisis is fast finishing with this middle class social stratus

There has been awareness about the crisis for some years now, but poverty has always been a part of Mexico's reality. I grew up in Chiapas, the poorest state in the country. Kids without shoes, begging for money was an everyday event something that was just there, not necessarily as part of a big economical failure, but as part of the country's reality itself.

The first big crisis that we young people, now in our twenties, were to come to experience in Mexico was the Economic Crisis of 1995. In Chiapas many of those who were kids then, never heard about it. In the year after the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, unlike many other young people, who lived in other states, and who noticed that their parents lost their jobs, their houses, their companies, kids in Chiapas noticed the military men in the roads, the indigenous people with masks on the streets, noticed all the journalists from all over the world invading some of the towns. That was what we noticed. The crisis - we didn't even understand that word.

But now 16 years afterwards, we start hearing the same word again, crisis, the big economic crisis, the international crisis, this scary thing that has been growing since 2008 - it's starting to take over the world. Thanks to the *Indignant Movement* in Spain, thanks to the "Occupy wall street movement", thanks to headlines in the newspapers, to conversations with people, thanks to our own experiences and posts on Facebook, to chain-mail sent by teachers and friends, we started to realize, as many others are realizing, that there is something not going well with our country, with our continent, with the world.

Inequality and exclusion are words recurrent when talking about many of the Latin American countries, and Mexico's current economic and social situation is no exception. Inequality is the main reason, according to the United Nations Development Program, for Mexico dropping down 15 places, from last year to 2011, on the Human Development Index charts. In the same Human Development Report, by UNDP, it is stated that the whole region, Latin America and the Caribbean, has one of the highest rates of inequality in the planet, due to the differences in access to education, health and difference in incomes. Also when it comes to gender issues,

Mexico has a high rate of gender inequality that is reflected on the statistics of gender mortality, reproductive health and political representation.

Exclusion is a concept that has become familiar to many, especially young people. When it comes to studies and work in Mexico we have an expression called *Ni-ni*, that could be translated as No-No (No job no studies). 22% of those aged 15 to 18 years old in Mexico are considered *Ni-nis*, according to a study done this year by the Technological Institute and Higher Studies of Monterrey in Mexico (*ITESM* in Spanish). This portrays a situation that is obvious for many people - there are teenagers everywhere; in parks, on the streets, offering to wash cars, to carry groceries, to do things that keep them occupied, because they need something to do and of course they also need money, because they are aware that this situation determines future events. It is a known fact that in Mexico approximately only 1 out of 3 people gets into a public university. So college is also not an option for the *Ni nis*. And having a “formal” job is also difficult because all the low skilled positions are being taken by the ones who didn’t get into college but finished high school. But this situation expands to other age groups and it can be said that this exclusion goes from teenagers to adults, to people in their 20’s and their 30’s.

Another problem related to this exclusion is the fact that unemployment and lack of education creates violence. The way violence is starting to be a part of the everyday life in Mexico is shocking. And when talking about violence in Latin America, it’s hard to ignore the war against drug trafficking conducted by the government of Mexico for the last six years, a war that also occurred in other countries like Colombia. This war in Mexico has killed more than 50 thousand people in the last 6 years according to different newspapers. Everyday there are headlines about dead people or armed confrontations all over the country. There are towns that are being abandoned because of this violence.

In Mexico the violence is everywhere, many of us young people used to think that was something that happened only on the north, or in the border with the United States, or to people involved with the drug dealing. But years have pass and this violence is invading the whole country. On November 24th on the middle of two big avenues in Guadalajara, Jalisco, no more than 3 kilometers away from my house, three cars where found with 26 dead bodies inside, and there was also a message from a drug cartel called *Los Zetas* to the government as call of attention to let them know that the Cartel was in control of this region. The worst part is that the bodies where young men, 18 out of the 26 where not even 30 years old, they were workers with steady jobs, that had nothing to do with drug dealing. This has left a sense of uneasiness on the city. Everyone can be a victim, and the target is the youth.

Another example of violence is Ciudad Juarez, a city in the north border of Mexico that is a kind of low scale crisis lab. In this city, once invaded by *Maquiladoras* (Massive production factories), and famous for the killings of hundreds of women, the organized crime has killed, according to

the BBC, more than 28 thousand people from December 2006 to August 2010. And because of this violence and unemployment, close to another 20% of its population has left this city.

But in this country where crisis seems to be a part of the everyday life, there are still people trying to make a difference. In Juarez there are teenagers dressed up as angels standing next to crime scenes with signs that try to get people's attentions, because, as a 14 year old girl said to the *NY Times*, "Things here, well, they need to change". In Juarez there is this concept of "anchored families" that refers to all of the families that in spite of having lost family members to the violence or the unemployment-induced exodus of their friends or family, have decided to stay. These anchored families do not trust the government, or think that it's going to help them when they're in trouble, but they trust their neighbors, they trust their friends and the networks of help they have created between each other.

So if hope can be found in a place like Ciudad Juarez, then it can be found in other parts of Mexico and of Latin America. Maybe in Mexico there are not these big demonstrations full of young *indignados* (indignants), we do not have the big *Occupy* movements. But we have organizations that are doing things; City for everyone, Mexico Occupy the Street, Economy of Solidarity Networks, Migrant helpers... And not only in Mexico, Latin America is full of organizations and movements that fight for many causes.

But the organizations are not the only movements, there is also a real movement that is not established, that doesn't have a name and is based on everyday relations. As Manuel Castells mentions in the video "The aftermath of Crisis": "...The crisis-affected people are thinking 'let's be together and if we're together we can create something different'" (Castells, 2011). And this is what is happening among many young people in Mexico, and also in Latin America - there are networks of solidarity, we take care of each other, we take care of our friends and our families, as Castells puts it "we are together", many of us are not marching through the streets, or holding up signs, or screaming slogans, but we are helping each other out in every way we can. And maybe if every young person helps the person that is next to them we will be able to create another way of thinking, putting individualism aside and creating a general awareness of our *togetherness* we can use the crisis as a tool to discover that people next to us are walking in the same direction and together we can create a world that doesn't leave anyone out.